DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 125 258 FL 007 504

AUTHOR Philips, Susan U.
TITLE Teasing, Punning, and Putting People On. Working Papers in Sociolinguistics, No. 28.
INSTITUTION Southwest Educational Development Lab., Austin, Tex.
SPONS AGENCY Social Science Research Council, New York, N.Y. Committee on Sociolinguistics.
PUB DATE Dec 75
NOTE 23p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Figurative Language; Human Relations; *Humor; Interpersonal Relationship; Kinesthetic Methods; Language Arts; Nonverbal Communication; Paralinguistics; *Puns; Social Relations; *Sociolinguistics; Standard Spoken Usage; Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Speech Acts; *Teasing

ABSTRACT

The performance and recognition of the act of putting people on involves an awareness and use not only of aspects of the communicative process that hold for all face-to-face interaction, but also of culturally acquired aspects of communication. Teasing and punning are varieties of communicative acts that involve the use of the put-on to accomplish their ends. They seem also to involve a kind of relatedness between verbal and nonverbal communicative acts that is not usually acknowledged, suggesting that the same act can be accomplished through either mode or through a combination of both, and raising the possibility that this may be true of some speech acts or genres. More generally, this paper argues for an interactional approach to the analysis of punning and teasing, so as to include both the efforts of the instigator of the act and those with whom he is interacting. Finally, it is recommended that nonliteral or nonserious communicative acts make more sense when considered in relationship to the literal formulations on which they depend, and that examination of nonliteral uses can in turn contribute to our understanding of the literal usage of both verbal and nonverbal modes of communication. (Author/DB)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED125258

WORKING PAPERS IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Number 28

December, 1975

Teasing, Punning, and Putting People On

by

Susan U. Philips
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

FL007504

Sponsored by the Social Science Research Council
Committee on Sociolinguistics
Prepared and distributed at

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
211 East Seventh Street
Austin, Texas 78701

Teasing, punning, and putting people on all involve non-serious or non-literal uses of systems of communication. My purpose in this paper is to examine them as instances of non-serious communication to see what can be learned from them about serious or literal communication, and to explore the relationship between literal and non-literal usage. There is a reason for focusing on teasing and punning (and on the put-ons that I shall argue are made use of in both) for this purpose. In certain respects, these specialized usages resemble what are referred to as speech genres and/or speech acts in anthropological and folkloristic literature. Hopefully, the treatment of teasing and punning in a somewhat different way than speech acts and genres are typically approached will suggest alternative modes of analysis for the phenomena that come to be defined as genres and acts.

The data on which this paper is based is derived primarily from field work on Indian reservations in the Plateau and Plains regions of the Northwestern United States, primarily the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon, but also the Blackfeet, Northern Cheyenne, and Rocky Boy Reservations in Montana. My intent is not, nowever, to provide a full account of a distinctively Indian approach to punning and teasing, although I will suggest some of the ways in which their usages seem to differ from that of the white middle class. Rather, I draw heavily on Indian punning and teasing for primarily methodological reasons: Indians in these regions do a great deal of both, especially teasing. Indians from the Plains reservations, where people seem to be more explanatory of their culture than in the Plateau, will be the first to tell outsiders that this is the case. In addition, 'outsiders' are among those categories of persons with whom a great deal of punning and teasing is undertaken. Possibly it happens

more with white people than with other Indians, but there is ethnographic evidence that such activities have been traditionally initiated with Indians from other groups, e.g.:

> The Blackfeet loved to poke fun at strangers, especially members of other bands. When a number of men gathered in a lodge to welcome a guest it was common for some of them to make indecent remarks about him. Should the guest appear annoyed at their jibes, they only intensified their efforts. It was the host's duty to prevent the joking from going too far. One Piegan band was noted for annoying visitors by a mock family row. The host began a quarrel with his wife. Neighbors rushed in and took the woman's part. In the general row which followed all fell upon the guest and roughed him up without doing him any serious injury. (Ewers, 1958: 145)

I was consequently in the position of being party to a great deal of punning and teasing. My difficulty in discerning in the same way that Indians could when people were being put on gave me cause to treat the relationship between literal and non-literal messages as problematic in a way that I would not in my own cultural milieu. It is out of this, then, that use of data from North American Indian teasing, punning, and putting people on has developed.

The term 'punning' is used by English-speaking Americans, among whom I would include the Indians I worked with, to refer to instances of linguistic play that are held to have something in common. Most such instances seem to involve words and/or phrases that either sound the same, but have more than one meaning, or sound different, but only slightly so, and have different meanings. The actual practice of punning involves the contextual use of such phrases and words in such a way as to highlight or bring into conscious awareness just this relatedness. Beyond this sharedness, there is considerable variation in what gets recognized and labeled as a pun.

Some puns involve the single use of a word or phrase in such a way that more than one meaning can be assigned to that word, as in the following examples:

> 1. Hubert Humphrey (at his own "Roasting" on the Dean Martin Show, TV): "We democrats take an interest in California. It has always been one of our primary concerns."
>
> 2. Los Angeles Times (Sunday, November 18, 1973): "At 67, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia has more energy than most men."
>
> 3. Here's Lucy (TV program): Did you hear the one about the Indian who couldn't get a room at the hotel because he didn't have a reservation?

Other puns involve two adjacent uses of a word or phrase to accomplish a pun:

> 1. A joke (told by a Montana Indian): Two Indians from Montana walked into a hotel in Washington, D.C., went up to the desk, and asked for a room. The desk clerk says, "Do you have reservations?" And one Indian says, "Yeh, we got lots of reservations back in Montana."
>
> 2. A: But none of these paradigms are of much use politically.
> B: No. I wouldn't give a pair of dimes for any of them.
>
> 3. Groucho Marx (in Duck Soup): Now all we need are some red ants and we'll have a real picnic.
> Harpo Marx: I know an Indian with two red aunts.

Sometimes the second of the two adjacent uses does not actually involve the word or phrase itself:

> 1. Rodney Dangerfield (on the Johnny Carson Show, November 22, 1973): "We have a very nice children's zoo in our neighborhood. But last week two children escaped from it."
>
> 2. TV News broadcaster (San Diego, Channel 8): Tonight we have a story about a hot dog. Last week Mrs. _____ of _____ had her little puppy stolen.

And this second use may not even involve talk. For example, in Horsefeathers, another Marx Brothers' movie, there is a scene in which two

men sit down at a table with a deck of cards, with Harpo standing by. One of the men says to the other, "Cut the deck", and Harpo reaches out with an axe and slices the deck in half.

Double usage puns can be done by either one person who accomplishes a pun in two connected utterances, or by two people. In the two-party puns, the second person's response makes use of the first person's utterance in a manner other than as it was initially used and intended, and it is the second person who is identified as the punster.

Two-party puns are often cast in the form of 'misunderstandings', so that the second speaker can be seen as 'misunderstanding' the first, and it is primarily in this format of the deliberate misunderstanding that punning occurs among Indians.

The examples to follow are drawn from the Indian data (and will be through the rest of the paper):

> 1. A boy approaches a woman with his arms full of ears of corn, and after they exchange greetings, he says: "Mom thought you might like some corn. How much do you want?" The woman says, "Two ears ought to do it." The boy says, "O.K.", and with one hand reaches to each of his ears in turn and pulls at them (as adults do to children in pretending to pull off their noses). Then he holds out his hand as if to deliver the ears, and says, "Here." The woman says, "Oh, B_____." He laughs, withdraws the hand that has not been accepted, and hands her the corn.
>
> 2. Three children and an adult are standing by a car, and the adult says, "We'd better hit the road." Two of the children turn toward the car, but the third says, "O.K.", and using the jacket she is holding, she begins to strike the ground with the jacket, giggling as she does so. She then breaks her own action and turns to the car.
>
> 3. A final variation on 'reservation'
>
> Indian: What do you think of this plan?
> White: Well, I have some **reservations**.
> Indian: You do? Then you should give them to us.

The same sort of deliberate misunderstanding also occurs in ways that cannot properly be said to involve punning, in that the source of potential ambiguity and of more than one meaning cannot be traced to or located in a single word or phrase, but draws rather on more diffuse or less easily located aspects of the organization of signs. Here are some examples from Indian interactions:

> 1. On a school playground, the teacher is directing a group of first grade children to organize them to play a game. She says, "Everyone on this side line up along there," gesturing as she speaks to a line painted on the pavement. As the children head for this line, one little girl stops abruptly at a line closer by, turns around, and says, "Here?", presumably to the teacher whose attention is elsewhere. But even as she finishes speaking she begins to laugh and turns to move to the correct line, indicating in this way that what could have been a real misunderstanding on her part was in fact deliberate.
>
> 2. A is describing his experience climbing Mt. Hood to B.
>
> A: But first we had to go to this office and rent some special shoes. The people there gave us a map and showed us the route to climb.
> B: How long did it take you?
> A: About ten minutes.
> B: I mean the mountain.
> A: (chuckles) Oh! About six hours.

In both non-punning deliberate misunderstandings and in the punning, the second party's response entails a reading of the first party's communicative act that is of questionable plausibility, if the disambiguating context in which it occurs is attended to. Normally a correct reading is facilitated by whatever potential ambiguity there is being reduced through the redundancy of the message, or through what is often referred to as contextualization. The doing of a deliberate misunderstanding involves the ability to ignore or strip away that disambiguating structure and to focus on the potential sources of ambiguity, constructing around them another contextualization that is then implied in the response.

This doing involves putting people on in that it is an attempt to pass off a deliberate misunderstanding as a real one. But if a put-on is considered from the point of view of how the efforts of the instigator of the pun or misunderstanding are evaluated by his audience, the following distinctions can be made: 1. The instigator's response may be judged as both implausible (i.e., as a misreading) and as non-serious (i.e., deliberate). Most puns are judged in this way, at least partly because although they are misunderstandings, they can be seen as doing something else, namely punning. 2. His response can be judged as implausible, but a serious or real and unintentional misunderstanding. Some deliberate misunderstandings are taken for real misunderstandings, as the last example could have been. 3. Finally, his response may be judged to be both plausible and serious, in which case it would be more appropriate to speak of a deliberate misconstruction, since the effort is not perceived as a misunderstanding. Here we would be dealing with what could be called the full-fledged put-on.

Some examples that illustrate this third variation can be provided from the interactions of Indian students at the sixth grade level at the Warm Springs Reservation Grade School.

> 1. The teacher is conducting a discussion about the jungle environment and its animals. In the context of some student confusion about the differences between lions, tigers, panthers, etc., the following takes place.
>
> Teacher: O.K. Now everybody knows what a cat is...
> Student A: No, I don't know what a cat is. (Student B who has been out of the room re-enters as A is speaking; A turns to B as he is coming in and addresses him). Tommy, do you know what a cat is? (B just stares at him, and he turns back to the teacher). Mr. _____ (the teacher), Tommy doesn't know what a cat is.
> Teacher: Alright, let's get on with the lesson.

2. Several students are working together at a table where a microphone has been placed. One student turns from the group and calls out to the teacher, "Mr. _____, Charlie's foolin' with the mike." Charlie says, "I am not." The teacher looks up when summoned, but doesn't respond, turning back to his paper work. In this case, Charlie hadn't touched the microphone.

3. In the cafeteria students sit at long tables, along each side and facing one another. While Student A is glancing away, Student B takes the roll off A's plate and puts it on the plate of Student C. When A sees his roll is gone, he says, "Who took my roll?" B looks at C and says "He did." C says "That's mine. B has it". A fourth student, who saw the whole thing then says, "He's got it." and nods to C who has the roll. A then grabs his roll.

4. A fourth example is drawn from a context other than the school. Three women come out of a restaurant and hesitate, unsure of where they left the car. One says, "What color is the car?" The second woman answers, "White." The third woman abruptly moves toward a white car to the left, and the others, reading this as indicating she has spotted the car, start to follow her. But she breaks stride immediately, and turns around, laughing. It was not the right car.

In each of these instances, something that did not occur was, however briefly, incorporated into literal interaction through the instigator's 'response' to it; Tommy did not say he doesn't know what a cat is; Charlie did not touch the mike; the boy on whose plate the roll ended up was not the one who took it, but neither was the roll his; and the spotting of the car did not occur.

It should be evident from even these few examples, that parties to the interaction in which putting people on occurs are in different positions vis-a-vis that putting on. Minimally, the following positions can be distinguished as potentially entering into the put-on:

1. <u>The instigator</u>: From the point of view of a known put-on, the instigator acts on the basis of an interpretation, or framing, to use Goffman's term (Goffman, 1974), that he does not himself in fact subscribe to. He holds, then, two interpretations of what has occurred: one that he does not subscribe to, but on which he acts, and one

that he does subscribe to, but keeps to himself. However, as the put-on is ongoing, and not as yet defined as a put-on, others present will not perceive this duality behind the instigator's act, and will view act and interpretation as synonymous.

2. The deluded: The deluded are persons who are put on. They initially treat the instigator's action as literal and serious, whether plausible or implausible, or at least as potentially so, since it is often the case with put-ons that their plausibility hangs in the balance. They infer, then, a oneness between the instigator's act and his interpretation that is not actually there.

3. The included: Some persons will perceive the act in the same way the instigator does, by virtue of their access to information the deluded do not have. But here it is necessary to make a further distinction between colluders and revealers. The colluder does not challenge the instigator's interpretation, does not dispute it. He may even contribute to it, and come to be perceived as a co-instigator. The revealer, on the other hand, challenges the instigator's interpretation, and if he is judged to be in a position to have information to do so, he refutes it. Sometimes, of course, the instigator becomes the revealer.

Persons in two of these positions are sometimes said by Indians to have been teased by the instigator of the put-on. The first of these positions is that of the deluded. Merely to put someone on is sometimes referred to as 'teasing' them. This usage is one that seems in keeping with that of non-Indians. The second position is one who is included in that it is his act that has been misinterpreted or created out of thin air. He is the one at whose expense a put-on is being made--the person whose image in the eyes of others is being modified through the put-on. Such persons are in a good position to judge whether or not they did or did not do or say something and whether or not it was interpreted as intended. But where the modification has negative connotations, as it does in the school examples cited, they are seen to have a vested interest in how they are defined, and they become in this context the least credible revealers. Since Tommy is as likely to deny having touched the mike if he

actually did, as he is if he didn't, how can he be trusted? Persons placed in this position are thus 'teased' by virtue of being so placed. What often gets called teasing, then, is carried out through the format of a put-on. But teasing is also seen as occurring in exchanges that do not involve putting people on, and putting people on does not always accomplish teasing.

At this juncture, it may be of some use to review briefly the relatedness of teasing, punning, and putting people on, as they have been characterized thus far. Teasing and punning are terms used by Indians in much the same way they are used by white middle class persons. But Indian punning usually involves the two-party form of a deliberate misunderstanding. And Indian teasing much more often involves or makes use of both deliberate misunderstandings and deliberate misconstructions than is the case among persons of white middle class background.

The phrase 'putting people on' is rarely used by Indians, and I use it here analytically to refer to the deliberate management of ambiguous elements in face-to-face interaction so that an interpretation of what has occurred is made to seem plausible, but then revealed as implausible, and deliberately so.

Thus while punning and teasing are qualitatively quite different sorts of communicative acts, both are often accomplished through the same sort of playing with ambiguity. And it is this play, rather than named communicative acts, that figures significantly in Indian use of both verbal and non-verbal modes of communication. One finds it not only in teasing and punning, but also in the myths in which Trickster characters (Radin, 1956) and acts of tricking (Jacobs, 1959) figure prominently.

It does not follow from this that such Indian play is always recognizable to Indians, but rather that their put-ons make use of the same

general properties of communication in face-to-face interaction that put-ons in any cultural context would. In Black culture in the United States, for example, putting people on appears central to the act labeled 'shucking,' as it has been described by Kochman (Kochman, 1972).

But how put-ons are recognized as non-literal and also as non-serious remains to be considered. And it is through attention to the relationship between put-ons and deceits on the one hand, and put-ons and real misunderstandings on the other, that means for identifying put-ons become more evident.

As was noted earlier, attention to real misunderstandings allows us to see that when punning or teasing is accomplished through deliberate misunderstandings, the instigator is making use of the common and familiar occurrence in interaction of real misunderstandings to accomplish something other than that which it typically accomplishes. He uses the format of a real misunderstanding to accomplish punning or teasing. The doing of a deliberate misunderstanding, then, depends on participants' awareness of and recognition of real misunderstandings. The instigator may be said to be faking or putting on a misunderstanding.

Sacks and Schegloff (1973) treat what I here refer to as misunderstandings as one of the sorts of conversational items subject to 'repair,' although repairs are not always done when misunderstandings are seen by someone as having occurred. In terms of conversational sequencing, a repair involves cycling back through that which requires repair. In the case of real misunderstandings, the person who has been misunderstood is considered the most reasonable doer of the repair, so that both his misunderstood [illegible]erance and the misunderstanding response are cycled back through. Repairs and cycling back through can also be done on deliberate misunderstandings. But with deliberate misunderstandings, the person

perceived as having misunderstood is in the position to do such a repair, and it is his doing of the repair that informs others the misunderstanding was deliberate--a non-literate act, a put-on.

However, not all deliberate misunderstandings are identified in this way by their instigators, and there are other ways that they are distinguished by their hearers from real misunderstandings:

1) The plausibility of the misunderstanding: How plausible is it that the act misinterpreted was ambiguous in ways allowing for the instigator's misinterpretation? If it is highly implausible, that is if the structure of the message is redundant in organization in ways that preclude such an interpretation, then the misunderstanding is likely to be perceived as non-literal.

2) The doing of other things in the minsunderstanding: If the misunderstanding can be seen to do or accomplish something like punning, teasing or shucking--i.e., can be seen to be being used as a device, then the misunderstanding is more likely to be perceived as a put-on.

3) Identification by the instigator: Even if the instigator does not repair his own misunderstanding, he may reveal its deliberateness in other ways, most notably through smiles and laughter (or the faking of faked seriousness) that run through his response or follow it. Here, then, if the misunderstanding is of questionable plausibility, then those who would determine whether or not it is deliberate may search for signs or markers of non-literality and non-seriousness, and find them in the laughter and smiles. Laughter and smiles in this context, then, serve to disambiguate and define the misunderstanding as deliberate and non-literal.[1]

---

[1]Gail Jefferson's treatment of laughter has suggested this to me.

Distinguising between a deceit and a put-on involves judgments about intent. If the misconstruction is judged to have been intended to be solidly and permanently locked into literal interaction, then it is more likely to be deemed a deceit. If, however, it is judged to have been intended to be revealed and re-interpreted as non-literal, then it is more likely to be deemed a put-on. The process through which a communicative act is first perceived as plausible, and then re-defined as implausible is in itself a tricky matter.[2] But given the occurrence of

[2]Although I do not have any verbatim examples of put-ons gradually coming to be revealed, the following novelistic example suggests that the revelation process might best be analyzed in terms of the presence or absence of sequential consistency or redundancy. In what follows, Mrs. Kissock thinks Wallace Wright is dead, but Mamie knows he is alive:

> ....Mrs. Kissock recovered and asked where the body of Wallace Wright would be taken so that she could send a wreath.
> Mamie solemnly advised her to simply give Wallace some ham if she really wanted to do something for the Negro Problem.
> "Hams!" Mrs. Kissock exclaimed. "Are we talking about Wallace's remains?"
> "Naturally", Mamie said in the slurred voice of stupefaction. "And I am suggesting that you give him hams. The poor man must need some desperately by now."
> "But hams! Can you be serious?"
> "I was never more serious in my life."
> "But is it the custom of the Negro people here to bury their loved ones with hams?"
> "Not with hams, in hams," Mamie corrected. "I love nothing better than to bury my loved ones in my hams."
> "Oh, dear, I don't believe I understand. Do they feel they must prepare the body for a long journey?"
> "The longer the better."
> "But it sounds so barbaric, really positively loathsome."
> "It feels better than it sounds," Mamie slurred evilly.
> "You should try it sometimes, in fact regularly."
> "I should certainly never bury a loved one of mine in hams," Mrs. Kissock said, shuddering.
> "You don't know what you're missing," Mamie said.
> Mrs. Kissock grimaced. "I detest ham," she said vehemently. "I can't bear to eat it. It has such a strong flavor and the meat is dark, some of it is positively black."

that process, what properties of a perceived misconstruction are likely to mark it as a put-on and intended to be revealed, rather than as a deceit, and intended to be concealed?

1) What comes to be perceived as a put-on is, first of all, likely to be seen as having been from the beginning more vulnerable to revelation because of the immediate availability to at least some parties present of information that challenges the plausibility of the misconstruction. For example, in the previously described incident in which one student told the teacher that Charlie had been fooling with the microphone, there were several students with visual access to Charlie's actions so that they were in a position to deny that Charlie had fooled with the microphone, even though the teacher was not in such a position. This misconstruction was in this sense quite vulnerable to revelation. Had its instigator been seriously attempting a deceit, he would have carried it out when the other students were not around.

2) Now from the teacher's position, the message "Charlie's fooling with the mike" was not inconsistent with any non-verbal messages he was receiving; he lacked the visually received information the students had.

---

[2](continued) "Your husband certainly won't agree with you," Mamie said maliciously. "That's what he likes. Strong-flavored black meat. If you had black hams yourself, he would love nothing better than to bury himself in them." "Oh! Oh! Well, I never!" Mrs. Kissock said, finally getting the drift. "You nasty, vulgar woman. I shall never speak to you again." (Himes, 1961)

Here, each response from the instigator is increasingly inconsistent with the deluded's initial reading of 'hams'--said reading having been deliberately fostered by the instigator. And as the redundancy of the initial reading breaks down, redundant information for a second reading is gradually built up around 'hams.'

One could then say that from his point of view, there was redundancy and consistency across all channels of communication in the message he was receiving, or at least there was nothing that conflicted with or countered it until Charlie's denial. Not so for the students, for whom the verbal and non-verbal were contradictory, and for whom the instigator's communicative act was implausible. The redundancy of a message, then, is involved in judgments of 'plausibility' and it is the gross implausibility of the instigator's act for some parties to the act that makes it vulnerable to revelation.

3) Finally, a misconstruction is more likely to be defined as a put-on if it is revealed by its instigator or one of the included in a position to reveal it, before what can come to be seen as damaging consequences result from the misconstruing--especially damaging consequences that are seen as working to the advantage of the instigator. Thus in the example of the roll being stolen, revelation prevents the wrong party from being blamed for the act.

In spite of the means available for distinguishing a put-on from a deception or a real misunderstanding, they are often confused, so that one can be and often is taken for the other. Awareness of this possibility can be made use of, so that what was intended as one sort of act can later be claimed as another sort of act. It is difficult to imagine circumstances in which it would be desirable to claim that what was originally intended as a deception and to be taken as literal interaction, was in fact merely a put-on of some sort. With misunderstandings, it is sometimes useful to claim that what was in fact a real misunderstanding was deliberate, if the misunderstanding is treated as implausible in a way or to a degree that reflects on the intelligence and good judgment of the person who misunderstood.

What comes to be called a real misunderstanding results from aspects of communication in face-to-face interaction that are made use of in both putting people on and in deceiving them, with the difference between these two to be found in the deliberate fragility or flimsiness of the construction of the put-on. On what constant features of face-to-face interaction, then, do these various usages depend?

There is first of all the normal occurrence of parties to an interaction having different interpretations of a communicative act, both at the moment of its occurrence, and as that act comes to be understood within a temporal and sequential framework. Closely related to this is the shift in perspective or interpretation that a single individual may experience in regard to a particular communicative act.

But such interpretive variability is in itself derivative of other dimensions of the communicative process. The first and most relevant of these is the inherent ambiguity of signs. One often discussed feature of communicative systems, conceived as a set of rules, is their capacity to generate an infinite number of distinct and unique messages through the combining and rearranging of elements that in turn derive their meaning from and through this ordering, rather than meaning anything in and of themselves. And the term 'redundancy' is used to refer to the structuring of messages in such a way that if some items are missing, it is possible to guess at the missing items with better than random success (Bateson, 1972). Messages, then, are structured so that complementary and sometimes identical information is transmitted through different channels and through different levels of the organization of the message. This redundancy, then, facilitates a cross-referencing in communication (Birdwhistell, 1970) and reduces ambiguity. Given the potential of the rule-governed

communicative systems to generate such a range of combinations of signs, such redundancy reduces the likelihood that the message will be read as a combination other than the one intended. Where there is inconsistency rather than complementarity in the structure of the message, and where there are indeed 'parts missing', the likelihood of ambiguity in the message increases.

In actual interaction, those endeavoring to communicate with one another are in several senses not likely to be in the same position vis-a-vis the sending and receiving of messages, so that for each, the perceived inconsistencies and 'parts missing' will differ. What is seen and heard will not always be the same for all parties to an interaction (in Goffman's terms, their 'evidential boundaries' will differ), as in the examples of the children in the cafeteria and the teacher and students in relation to the microphone. There will be differences in selective attention and disattention that cannot be observed because they have to do with what people are thinking about, but are nevertheless understood to occur. And finally, the 'rules' for use and interpretation of the communicative system will vary from one person to another.

To the degree that parties to an interaction are aware there will be sources of potential ambiguity in messages and are aware of the aspects of the communicative process that result in those ambiguities being made sense of in different ways by different persons, they will draw upon, depend upon or make use of the interpretations of others, as read from their reactions, in arriving at an interpretation themselves. In this way, the responses of others become a part of the message, and contribute to either the redundancy or the ambiguity of the message. Others' responses are taken into account to correct for error in one's own interpretation, and provide, as it were, a cross-reference to it.

At the same time, such cross-referencing is done with reservation, based on the awareness of the similar limitations of other parties' interpretive procedures, and also on the awareness that the limitations of one's access to disambiguating information allow for a range, albeit a limited range, within which fabrication by others may be carried out.

The person who instigates a put-on, then, must make assessments of the access other parties present have to the information he will misconstruct, must locate areas of potential ambiguity, or the 'parts missing' for other parties or plausibly missing for himself, fill in those holes with an interpretation that is consistent enough with what information is available to be at least minimally plausible, yet at the same time do so in such a way that his work is vulnerable to being undone by others present or by himself.

But putting people on requires not only a general awareness of the aspects of the communicative process that can be made use of in this way, but also specific knowledge of the cultural organization of symbolic systems of the people who are party to the put-on.

There are several aspects of the cultural organization relevant here. First, the ways in which sensorially perceivable substances (sounds, body movements) are organized and distinguished will vary culturally and the identification of both ambiguous and redundant structuring will depend on the nature of that organization. This is most obvious in regard to linguistic structure where what constitute homonymic structures that can be made use of in punning will be different for different languages.

Second, putting people on requires cultural knowledge of the social contexts and role relationships for which such non-literal communication is appropriate. If it is done in an inappropriate context, or done to

the wrong persons, it is likely to be understood as something other than a pun or a tease, as is the case in reservation schools, where Indian students' deliberate misunderstandings are interpreted by white teachers as either literal, and hence giving evidence of student non-comprehension, or non-literal, but inappropriate and a deliberate display of lack of respect for the teacher.

But more central to the recognition of put-ons in particular are the cultural differences in the interpretive frameworks used in establishing plausibility. Consider, for example, stories told by Indians about encounters with sea monsters, Big Foot, spirits, stick Indians, and people who live underwater in the Columbia River--both their own encounters and those reported to them by others. Usually these stories begin with very plausible activities like berry-picking and fishing, and build to the meeting with the creature and the terror it involves in the people who encounter it. Many Indians treat these stories as renditions of literal events. But a story presented in the same format that builds to an encounter with a mermaid with a little motor and propeller on her tail is immediately defined as a put-on. It is difficult here to determine the parameters of plausibility. Thus one who attempts to acquire or operate within a plausibility framework that is not his own will find the ability to distinguish between the literal and the non-literal within that framework difficult to acquire, and as it is being acquired, the learner will be more vulnerable to being deluded than those who have already internalized the means to make such distinctions. Both children and outsiders are, then, from this point of view, more likely to be put-on.

The doing and the recognizing of putting people on, then, involves not only an awareness and use of aspects of the communicative process

that hold for all face-to-face interaction, but also culturally learned awarenesses.

The same holds true of 'punning' and 'teasing', and about those forms a few final comments can be made. In current folkloristic and anthropological studies of speech usage, analysis often involves the isolation of a speech genre or speech act that can be characterized in terms of distinctive linguistic features, predictable sequential structure, social function, and/or its place in the echelons of native lexicon (i.e., it has a name). Examples of such forms include proverbs, riddles, greetings, charms, ritual insults, all of which are seen as occurring cross-culturally, but identifiable in local variant forms. Sometimes a 'new' form is 'discovered', prompting a search for its likeness in other societies.

Punning and teasing are enough 'like' such forms to warrant considering what the analysis of them done here suggests for the study of speech acts and speech genres in general. Here, teasing and punning have been shown to be qualitatively different sorts of communicative acts that nevertheless have in common the use of the put-on to accomplish their ends. Phenomena which come to be labeled a speech act or speech genre may similarily be qualitatively quite variable in form and function, but made to seem similar through the sort of analysis that is done to them, suggesting a current need for a more naturalistic approach to the communicative behavior that comes to be labeled in this way. There is also a need to consider the relatedness of distinctive ways of speaking within a given society, and the relatedness in turn of these distinctive ways of speaking to that which is not perceived as distinctive.[3] Finally, the treatment

[3]Joel Sherzer has done just this in his treatment of three Cuna speech events, and the distinction between formal and informal speech that sets them off (Sherzer, 1974).

of teasing and punning here points to a kind of relatedness between verbal and non-verbal communicative acts that is not usually attended to, suggesting that the same act can be accomplished through either mode or through a combination of both, and raising the possibility that this may be true of some speech acts or genres.

More generally, the treatment here of punning and teasing argues for an interactional approach to the analysis of such forms, so that not only the efforts of the instigator of the act are treated as involved in the doing of the act, but also the efforts of those with whom he must interact to accomplish that doing.

Finally, this discussion recommends that non-literal or non-serious communicative acts can more effectively be made sense of when considered in relationship to the literal formulation on which they depend, and that examination of the non-literal uses can in turn contribute to our understanding of the literal usage of both verbal and non-verbal modes of communication.

REFERENCES

Bateson, Gregory
1972 Redundancy and Coding. In Steps to an Ecology of Mind, New York: Ballentine, 411-425.

Birdwhistell, Ray
1970 "Redundancy" in Multi-Channel Communication Systems. In Kinesics and Context, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 85-93.

Ewers, John C.
1958 The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Goffman, Erving
1974 Frame Analysis. New York: Harper and Row.

Himes, Chester
1961 Pinktoes. New York: Dell Publishing Company.

Jacobs, Melville
1951 The Content and Style of an Oral Literature. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jefferson, Gail
1972 Side Sequences. In David Sudnow (ed.) Studies in Social Interaction, New York: The Free Press, 294-338.

Kochman, Tom
1972 Black American Speech Events and a Language Program for the Classroom. In Courtney Cazden, V.P. John and D. Hymes (eds.) Functions of Language in the Classroom, New York: Teachers College Press, 211-266.

Radin, Paul
1956 The Trickster. New York: Bell Publishing Company.

Sacks, Harvey and Emmanuel Schegloff
1973 Seminar on Conversational Analysis. University of California, Irvine.

Sherzer, Joel
1974 Namakke, Sunmakke, Kormakke: Three Types of Cuna Speech Events. In Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer (eds.) Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 263-282.